

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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AT THE peephole I watched her slip the quarter pound of butter into her purse. Then I left the back storeroom and walked down the long center aisle to the front of the store.

Weaver was in the bakery goods section checking the new price changes. He looked up from the clipboard he carried when I came near.

"The woman in the gray-checked coat," I said. "She's in front of the frozen foods counters."

He shifted the cigar in his mouth and studied her. "Looks like East Side. Good clothes."

She was in her fifties, I thought, gray-haired, probably a grandmother. She wheeled her shopping cart toward the breakfast foods.

"What did she take?"

"A quarter pound of butter."

Weaver lit the stump of cigar and then we walked out the front of the store and stopped on the sidewalk.

Weaver kept his back to the large show windows. He rocked on his heels slightly and stared up at the sky. "Nice day. Perfect for golf."

We talked about the Greenfield course for a while and watched the traffic cop at the corner. Then I said, "She's at the check-out counter now."

Weaver didn't turn. "They just can't resist the butter. Such a small package and it just fits in the purse. Who's to know?"

I watched the girl at the register



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Big Brother is watching you . . . even in the supermarkets, it seems. Chilling thought, is it not? Makes for cautious behaviour, too.



ring up the items. The gray-haired woman's fingers touched the clasp of her purse. She hesitated.

Sometimes they change their minds at the last minute. They say something like, "Oh, my land's sake. Look what I put in my purse! I'm getting so absent-minded lately." And then they pay for what they had meant to steal.

But she opened her purse only far enough to extract a wallet. She handed some bills to the girl and waited for change.

"She's not paying for it," I said.

Weaver took another puff of his cigar and said nothing.

Thirty seconds later she came out of the store carrying the large bag of groceries.

Weaver stepped in front of her. "I'm the manager of this supermarket and this is my assistant. Let's go back inside. We've got something to talk about."

Her eyes widened. "Talk to me? About what?"

"About the quarter pound of butter you just stole. It's in your purse."

Her face colored. She looked at

us and then slowly opened the purse. She stared into it as though she'd never seen the inside before. "I was going to pay for it, but I just forgot. I'll give you the money now."

Weaver shook his head. "It's too late."

Her hands fluttered. "But I just forgot. I didn't really *steal* it."

"I watched you," I said. "When you shop for butter do you always look around carefully to see that no one's watching and then drop in into your purse?"

"Come on," Weaver said. "Let's go back inside."

We walked toward the rear of the store. On the back wall a large illustrated poster advertised a popular brand of coffee. The peep hole had been bored near the top of it and you got up there by climbing the stack of sugar bags in the back storeroom.

*By
Jack
Ritchie*



In the storeroom, Weaver pushed forward a wooden chair. "Sit down."

He went to the small desk and unlocked one of the drawers. He brought back two mimeographed sheets stapled together and clicked his ball point pen into writing order. "What's your name?"

She hesitated and then almost whispered. "Mrs. James Gillan."
"Address?"

"The . . . the Martin Apartments."

"Children?"

"I . . . I don't see why I have to tell you that."

"It's on the company form. That's all I know." Weaver asked more questions and then turned the first page under the second. He studied the printing and then handed the sheets to her. "Sign this. At the bottom."

Her eyes were frightened. "What is it?"

"A confession."

"But I *can't* sign anything like that!"

Weaver shrugged. "If you confess, it'll probably be easier on you." Then he glared at her. "Do you realize how much the company loses by the kind of thing you've done?"

"But . . . but it was *only* a quarter pound of butter."

"*This* time."

"I've never, *never* taken anything before."

"That's what every one of them says."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I *swear* I never . . ."

Weaver indicated the paper. "Sign it."

She showed sudden determination. "I *won't*."

Weaver turned to me. "Harry, phone the police."

She rose swiftly. "*Please*. Wait. Suppose I do sign this? What will happen to me?"

Weaver chewed on the cigar. "You got a record?"

"I told you I never . . . *never* . . ."

"All right, all right," Weaver said irritably. He rubbed his neck. "If this is really your first offense, you'll probably get probation."

"I'd be . . . taken into court?"

"Sure."

"Wouldn't that get into the papers?"

"I don't know. Maybe if you're important enough."

Her face was white. "But I just can't have the publicity. My children . . . my grandchildren . . . our friends would all know."

Weaver sighed. "I'm sorry. Why didn't you think of that before you stole the butter?"

"Couldn't I just *pay* for it and you could forget . . ."

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He seemed to consider that. "It isn't that simple. Maybe I'd just as soon forget the whole thing, but . . ." He stared at me speculatively.

She turned to me. "Couldn't *you* just forget about it too?"

After a moment or two, I smiled slowly. "Of course Mrs. Gillan. I'd be willing to forget about it."

Weaver snorted. "I wouldn't bet a plugged nickel on that." He took the cigar out of his mouth. "He'd go to the supervisor and see that I got into trouble."

I put away my smile. "I wouldn't do anything like that, Bill. I don't want your job that much." I met Mrs. Gillan's eyes for a few seconds and then quickly looked away.

She studied me and then spoke slowly. "Suppose that I *gave* you a hundred dollars?"

Weaver's eyes widened. "Now wait a minute, Mrs. Gillan . . ."

She turned to him. "Don't you *see*? If he accepts the money, he can't possibly go to the supervisor. He'd get into trouble himself if he did."

I cleared my throat. "I've got hospital bills and . . ."

Weaver laughed curtly. "Like

hell you have lots of hospital bills."

I didn't look at either one of them. "For about two hundred dollars, Mrs. Gillan, I think I could forget anything I saw."

Weaver started for me, but she put her hand on his arm. "Please! *Please* let him."

Weaver stared down at her. He closed his eyes for a moment, then he turned on his heel and left the storeroom.

I tore up the mimeographed sheets.

At two-thirty in the afternoon I left the peephole and went to Weaver. "The one in the bulky red coat."

He stared down the aisles. "What did she take?"

"A pound of butter," I said. "A dozen eggs. Cheese. She's in canned vegetables now and going strong. Probably got a bag sewn inside that coat."

Weaver glared. "A damned professional. We won't get a cent out of her. They'd all rather go to jail." He bit into the cigar. "Go down to the corner and get the cop."

